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The role of experts in forming family policy under an adversarial subsystem in the Czech Republic

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Abstract

This article analyzes the interplay between policymakers and scientists in developing the Family Policy Plan for the Czech Republic in 2017. As former members of the government commission that developed the plan, we base the article on participatory observation. When we joined the commission, a 'window of opportunity' had opened as the country for the first time ever had feminist-friendly minister and vice-minister of labour and social affairs. We explain why due to the inter- and intra-party dynamics, the parental leave reform to introduce 'daddy months' failed. We argue an adversarial subsystem existed in that the three coalition partners disagreed on the reform. According to Ingold and Gschwend (2014), under such circumstances, scientists play a strategic role, especially if there is unity among them. However, although there was basic unity among the scientists in the commission, the coalition partners at the governing level were able to block or water down the reform proposal under the study.

KEYWORDS

Czech Republic, expert commission, family policy, father leaves, gender, participatory observation

INTRODUCTION

In 2014, a rare event took place in the Czech Republic: an avowed feminist, Michaela Marksová-Tominová, became minister of labour and social affairs in a country which generally scores low on indexes of gender equality and where 'feminism' until recently had been considered a bad word (Saxonberg, 2015). Shortly after becoming minister, Marksová-Tominová took the initiative to create an expert commission (*Odborná komise pro rodinnou politiku*, 2015–2017). The three co-authors of this paper were invited to participate in the expert group for our gender and family policy expertise. A key issue for us from the beginning was to propose measures that would encourage fathers to share in the parental leave time.

The committee itself was primarily comprised of the leading researchers in the country who dealt with family policy issues. This included people from universities and research institutes dealing with demographics, economics, sociology, social policy and a representative from the national statistical office. A representative from an NGO was also included, which concentrated on the issue of women over 50, as the committee also dealt with family policy issues such as caring for elderly family members. At a later date, a representative from an NGO linked to

Abbreviation: ANO ("Yes" in English), action of dissatisfied citizens; ČSSD, czech social democratic party; KDU-ČSL, christian democratic people's party; NGO, nongovernmental organization; ODS, The civic democratic party; UK, United Kingdom.

the Christian Democrats also joined the committee after pressure from that party.

In the end, the government did not introduce any 'daddy months'. Nevertheless, we feel we can learn from our first-hand experiences about the possibilities of scientific experts to influence policymaking.

There has been relatively little theorising about the role of scientific experts in influencing policymaking and their personal experiences. Since many researchers have participated in government committees, worked for ministries, or acted as advisers, much can be learned from our participatory-observation perspectives. Our starting point is Weible et al.'s (2010) theory about the role of experts in policy subsystems based on the advocacy coalition framework. They argued that if the system is adversarial, then experts are likely to play a greater role as arbitrators, since they will give greater legitimacy to the government's policy, but if the system is not adversarial, experts are not needed to legitimise policy decisions. We discuss their ideas to determine how applicable they are to our case and what other factors must be considered to understand the role of experts in policy subsystems.

After giving some basic background information about Czech family policy, we discuss theories about the role of experts as well as our methodology. Then, we present our results and lessons, which can be learned from our experience about the role of experts in policymaking.

BACKGROUND

Czech family policy is based on a special type of explicitly genderising regime, which revolves around the 'norm of threeness' (Saxonberg, 2014). According to this norm, mothers are expected to work full time until they give birth, after which they stay at home until the child reaches the age of three. Once the child turns three, the child starts attending kindergarten, and the mother returns to full-time employment.

The Czech system has a six-month maternity leave that pays mothers about 70% of previous gross income (which in some cases corresponds to up to about 80–85% of previous net income since the benefit is not taxable). After that, parents are entitled to parental leave until their children reach the age of three. They also have the right to a parental leave benefit that has become flexible in that parents can either receive the standard flat-rate benefit up to the child's age of three, or they can choose a 'faster track' in which they receive more money per month (up to their monthly level of maternity leave benefit). In addition, they can also choose the 'slower track', in which they get less money per month than the standard rate until the child is four. Regardless of their choice, the total amount of the parental leave benefit remains the same. They can also change the 'track' or who receives the payment in the family (mother or father) until the total amount of the parental leave benefit is paid. In practice, most parents choose the standard three-year benefit, because they are not guaranteed their jobs back if they stay at home a fourth year (i.e., the leave is only three years, although one can receive the benefit for four years); and if they would like to choose the shorter variant, they face a lack of affordable daycare. Since the three-year benefit pays a low flat rate, it discourages fathers from participating, as the gender pay gap is nearly 22%, so most men earn higher incomes than the women in the families. Therefore, the Czech family policy is explicitly genderising (Saxonberg, 2013) in that it encourages separate gender roles in which the mother goes on parental leave while the father works. Since the benefit levels were so low, few men have gone on parental leave. Less than 2% of the parental leave benefit receivers are men (Höhne, 2017). This long parental leave makes the country more explicitly genderising than other European countries, as no other country has a four-year paid benefit, although most of the other Central European post-communist countries also have three years of benefits (Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021). However, in Poland, they are means-tested after the first year. Given this long parental leave, the motherhood penalty (defined as the decline in female employment upon having a child under six) is one of the highest in Europe (Formánková et al., 2014; [1]OECD Family Database, 2021). This contrasts with the degenderizing leave policies in Sweden, Norway and Iceland that include 'daddy months' that are reserved only for the father in a leave system in which benefits are paid on the income replacement principle. This principle encourages fathers to share the leave time as they will not lose much money when going on leave.

The Czech daycare system is also explicitly genderising in its support of the norm of threeness because access to daycare is about average or above average in Europe for children above three but one of the lowest in Europe for children younger than three (OECD Family Database, 2021; Saxonberg, 2014). For example, only about 6.5% of children under three attend daycare (and almost all of them are close to three-years old), compared to 52.7% and 71.7% in degenderizing Sweden and Denmark. Meanwhile, the percentage of children over three attending daycare is the same as in Denmark (78.7%) and only slightly less than in Sweden (94.1%) (Saxonberg & Szelewa, 2021, p. 198). Moreover, in contrast to some of the other countries that had explicitly genderising daycare policies (such as Austria and Germany before its reforms), kindergartens for children over three-years old

[1]Available from: https://www.oecd.org/els/family/database.htm

are open full-time rather than part-time. This further supports the norm-of-threeness in that it encourages mothers to return to work once the child reaches the age of three.

After joining the expert commission, we volunteered to join the sub-group working on the parental leave reform. Since the country had a coalition government, we were aware that our proposals might meet some opposition. The minister for social and labour affairs, Michaela Marksová-Tominová, was from the Czech Social Democratic Party (ČSSD), while the finance minister, Andrej Babiš, was the leader of the centre-populist ANO. Since ANO held nearly as many seats in parliament as ČSSD, the risk always existed that ANO would block reforms on the grounds that they might cost too much, given Babiš' opposition to increased taxes at the time. Meanwhile, the Christian Democratic People's Party (KDU-ČSL) was a minor coalition party, but one that had previously objected to policies aiming at increasing gender equality. Nevertheless, since the Social Democrats were the largest party and Marksová-Tominová had strongly advocated introducing 'daddy months' before the elections, we were hopeful that she would be able to create a window of opportunity for implementing Nordic types of family policy reforms.

We had two starting ideas about the reforms: one was the more radical plan of replacing the current system with the Nordic model, and the other was a more moderate proposal of simply introducing a paternity leave based on the same income-replacement principles as the maternity leave. Our more radical proposal was based on the Icelandic model, in which parents would receive 80% of their income for a certain period, with one-third of the time reserved for mothers, one-third reserved for fathers and the rest could be divided as the parents see fit (for comparison of Czech and Islandic model see Formánková et al., 2020). In order to finance this, we suggested that the paid leave time be decreased to 18 months. Thus, parents would receive much more money from months 7–18 compared to the low three-year flat rate, but the paid leaves would no longer be up to four years. Of course, such a reform would have to be accompanied by investments into quality public childcare services for children under the age of three, and this was also included in the family policy plan, but daycare is outside the scope of this article. Moreover, we wanted to be flexible and, as in Sweden, allow parents to receive less money per month and stay at home for a longer period. Thus, in practice, parents could still stay at home until their children were three, but they would then receive 40% of their monthly income. (To put this into perspective, under the current system, a parent with a median wage in 2021, who chooses the parental leave benefit up to the child's age of three, receives about 28% of his/her previous gross salary in the current system).

The less radical proposal was to keep the current system, but introduce a six-month income-related paternity leave with the argument that if there is a six-month income-related maternity leave, then the same benefits should be made available to fathers. This is the type of reform that Mahoney and Thelen (2010) referred to as 'layering', in which we add a new layer to the system rather than radically transforming it. In order to disarm the argument that the reform would be too expensive, we suggested introducing one month per year. That is, in the first year, only one month would be introduced for fathers, and in the second year, it would increase to two months, etc., meaning that the entire reform would take six years to implement. Moreover, if it were ever deemed that it was becoming too expensive, the government could decide temporarily to stop introducing one month per year. We also pointed out that cultural change takes time, so even if a one month paternity leave became available, it was highly unlikely that more than around 20% of all fathers would actually utilise their right, thus making the increase in costs rather negligible.

As Sabatier (1998, p. 106) noted, 'Within a coalition, administrative agencies will usually advocate more moderate positions than their interest-group allies'. Hence, it was not surprising that the ministry gave greater support for the less radical proposal. Nevertheless, we still felt it was a good strategy to present a more far-reaching reform, which we believed would be the best solution because then the ministry could accept our more moderate proposal on the grounds that it was less of a change. It is a good strategy to present maximum demands at first, so that when the proposals are watered down, they start at a higher level from the beginning, and thus, even after compromises are likely to end at a higher level than if the starting point had been the more 'pragmatic' proposals.

The ministry initially accepted the less radical proposal, but wanted to limit the number of daddy months to only three. This would still be a step in the right direction, and the Czech Republic would have been the first post-communist country to introduce paid daddy months. After the experts proposed their policy reforms in the first year, the ministry started to draft the family policy plan, but it was not finalised and accepted by the government until autumn 2017. In the end, the government accepted the proposal of introducing daddy months, but it was very watered down. It called for three months of paternity leave (named alternating bonus *střídací bonus*), but made no clear statement about the benefit level. In addition, the government did not accept the family policy plan until two weeks before the elections, making it impossible to pass the proposals before the elections.

Moreover, Social Democrats were expecting to significantly lose seats in the new parliament, which would make it unlikely for them to be able to push through reforms.

THEORY

So far, very little research has analysed the role of experts in Czech or Czechoslovak policy formation. Some studies have shown the importance of expert discourses or expert committees in policymaking in Czechoslovakia before 1989 (Hašková & Dudová, 2017; Heitlinger, 1987). Yet, we are not aware of any previous attempts at analysing the role of experts in the formation of Czech social policy or even post-communist social policy from the perspective of participatory observation.

Our starting point is the advocacy coalition framework, which analyzes how groups belonging to different epistemological communities form coalitions that provide different subsystems. According to this model, the influence of experts will vary depending on the type of subsystem that dominates. However, our case shows that this framework is insufficient if we do not take into account the dynamics of the government coalition and party factionalism.

According to the advocacy coalition approach, the coalitions develop under certain external conditions, which include relatively stable parameters such as sociocultural values and social structure, but eventually, they might face changes, such as changes in the socioeconomic conditions and the governing coalition (Sabatier, 1998). Changes are most likely to occur if there is a perceived need for change that leads to a 'punctured equilibrium' (Green-Pedersen & Princen, 2016) or 'critical juncture' (Collier, 1991), which causes a 'window of opportunity' to open up (Kingdon, 1984). That is, when there is some kind of external shock leading to a perception that change is necessary that allows policymakers to introduce radical reforms, a window opens up that allows them to take measure that alter the path of development (i.e., it becomes a critical juncture), so that new policies deviate from the previous path, thus puncturing the policy equilibrium. In our case, we perceived that a window of opportunity had indeed opened up for introducing radical change. Still, as we will discuss below, the members of the other advocacy coalition strove to maintain the status quo.

Those belonging to the different advocacy coalitions also belong to different epistemic communities. Such communities are 'knowledge networks or, more specifically, as networks of professionals possessing authoritative knowledge and expertise in a particular domain' (McNeely & Schintler, 2010, p. 2). These expert networks 'serve as channels for the exchange and diffusion of information and ideas and as sources of disciplinary and professional norms and connections' (McNeely & Schintler, 2010, p. 3). They form broad coalitions that include 'scientists, government and other public sector officials, and politicians, who come to share a common interpretation of the science behind an environmental problem...' (Gough & Shackley, 2001, p. 331). In Haas' view (1992, p. 3), epistemic communities have a 'shared set of normative and principled beliefs', 'shared causal beliefs', 'shared notions of validity' and a 'common policy enterprise'. Since they come from different epistemic communities to the extent that they are rational, their rationality is bounded by the cognitive filters they apply, which limit their perception of new information (Mukherjee & Howlett, 2015). Moreover, even though participants develop their ideas in conjunction with epistemic communities that usually are international by nature, they still must translate the ideas to fit the local conditions (Bockman & Eyal, 2002; Campbell, 2004)

Weible et al. (2010), as well as Ingold and Gschweden (2014), tied the advocacy coalitions to subsystems, which are similar to Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams. Weible et al. (2010), as well as Ingold and Gschweden (2014), distinguished between a unitary policy subsystem, a collaborative system and an adversarial subsystem. In a *unitary subsystem*, a homogenous coalition and experts serve as auxiliary allies. In a *collaborative subsystem*, at least two coalitions exist, and its members have different opinions, so scientists serve as allies and opponents. In an *adversarial subsystem*, existing coalitions do not trust each other, rarely cooperate, and experts play the role of principal allies or opponents. According to Ingold and Gschwend (2014), scientists play a peripheral role in policymaking in unitary subsystems, because the policymakers are able to pass the legislation they want without needing the legitimacy that expert groups can provide. However, experts may play a strategic role when there are conflicts between parties. In Weible et al.'s (2010, p. 528) words, 'The high value conflicts in adversarial subsystems, makes expert-based information appealing as a political weapon to argue against opponents'. In other words, when the system is adversarial, one side tries to use expert groups to legitimise their arguments and proposals (cf. Haas, 1992), as expert-based information has 'enormous political value' for the coalition (Ingold & Gschweden, 2014, p. 997). Because of their legitimacy, if the experts can provide 'solid empirical evidence', then the advocacy coalitions, which normally are not willing to question their core policy values, can open themselves to the kind of learning that can induce them to accept reforms (Sabatier, 1998). We claim that this is what happened in the Czech Republic: an expert committee was

formed in an adversarial subsystem, and the committee was able to provide a great deal of empirical evidence in support of its proposals, so the question is why this strategy failed.

In order to understand why the use of our expert group failed in getting the government to introduce 'daddy months' in the *adversarial* subsystem, we complement our analysis with a discussion of the coalition dynamics. Most of the research on coalition governments deals with the negotiations that take place in forming governments, such as negotiations over allocations of cabinet seats and ministerial portfolios or discussions over coalition agreements. Of greater concern for us here is the dynamics in passing policy proposals that were not part of a coalition agreement. Sweden provides a relevant example of what we mean. In 1933, the Social Democrats and the Peasant Party made an agreement in which the Peasant Party agreed to reforms in the unemployment insurance (a core issue for the Social Democrats), while the Social Democrats agreed to reforms in the agricultural policy (a core issue for the Peasant Party). Lewin (2002) used game theory to argue that the two sides could agree on the deal because they both had something to gain and concluded that they were better off with the compromise compared to the status quo. Therefore, each side could claim to their voters that they succeeded in passing legislation that was important to them. Similarly, in 1995, a centre-right coalition government in Sweden introduced the 'daddy month' into the parental leave system. The minister in charge of social policy came from the Liberal Party, which saw gender equality as a key issue. However, to get the coalition partners to agree to this move, the Liberals had to agree to a Christian Democratic proposal to introduce a flat-rate cash-for-care allowance for children under 3 years old. The Liberals opposed this as a move that would encourage mothers to stay at home for longer periods, as fathers were unlikely to use a benefit that only paid a flat rate. Again, each side had a core issue that they wanted to pass, so they agreed to a compromise where each side could get something they wanted. Thus, if the main adversarial coalitions can agree that change is necessary, there is a possibility that despite ideological differences, all sides can reach a consensus on goals (Weiss, 1979).

In addition, a party is more likely to press for core issues if it is relatively united, but as Bäck (2008) noted, parties can be fractionalised, which means we also need to consider the intra-party dynamics. Maor (1995) criticised Groennings (1968), who claims that it is easier for centralised parties to remain in coalitions than for decentralised ones. In contrast, Maor argues that decentralised parties are more flexible in dealing with conflicts. However, our study supports Groennings, as the inability of the feminist wing of the Social Democratic Party to get support within its own party for 'daddy months' became a major hindrance to the reform. In a case, in which the minister responsible for the paternity leave reform cannot convince her own party leaders of the necessity of the reform, then even the legitimising effect of having experts of her advocacy coalition was not enough to get the reform passed.

Thus, our argument is as follows: the advocacy coalition framework can explain why expert committees can gain influence when there is an adversarial subsystem if the following conditions are met:

1. There must be internal party unity for the main party proposing the reforms.
2. The party proposing the reforms must be willing to offer something in exchange for the support of the parties belonging to the other advocacy coalition(s).
3. The other advocacy coalitions must see the expert committee as being legitimate.

METHODOLOGY

Our starting point is our own observations from being members of the ministerial commission. This comes close to what is customarily called participatory observation, participant observation, or even 'observation of participation' (Tedlock, 1991, p. 78; Tseng, 2021) and also shares aspects with 'action research' (Cox et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2018).

In classical participatory observation, the social scientists are outsiders, who come in and observe, hoping that by participating in the events, they will gain the trust of the group they are studying and it allows researchers to get an 'insider's view' where they can understand people in their 'natural environment' (Lyndav, 2006, p. 189). Our case differed in that we were first participants as experts in the committee, who fought to introduce certain reforms, such as paid paternity leave based on the income-replacement principle. Then *afterward*, we decided to write about our experiences based on our memories and notes from having been present at both the larger committee meetings and the smaller subgroup meetings dealing explicitly with parental leaves. Thus, we were ourselves part of this natural environment.

Our research design also shares some aspects with action research. It was a collaborative project (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018; Cox et al., 2021; Jacobs, 2018; Susman & Evered, 1978), in which we cooperated with the ministry to work out proposals. The ministry largely gave us free hands, but it had some basic principles. We engaged in 'diagnostic action research' in that we worked

out a plan of action (the proposal for policy reforms) (Jefferson, 2014). Also, when starting this endeavour both to influence the government and to research how the committee actually functioned, we followed the action research tradition in focussing on learning lessons rather than testing hypotheses (Checkland & Holwell, 1998).

However, action research usually has as its starting point that there is a new problem that academics should do research on together with practitioners, where they create new knowledge and try to solve a problem. Furthermore, the scholars and practitioners should begin by negotiating the guidelines for the topic they will jointly research (Bartels & Wittmayer, 2018). In our case, all of the committee members had already thoroughly researched the main issues concerning family policy, so our main task was to agree on a concrete proposal rather than create new knowledge. The slight exception was that some of the economists made cost calculations connected to certain proposals.

Our own experiences were insufficient to understand the dynamics of what took place. Thus, to get a fuller picture, we combined our observations with documents that the committee produced between 2015 and 2017, including the various versions of the family policy plan until its approved version in 2017 and documents from the family policy plan's external evaluation process. The primary documents we used included the various proposals we made for the ministry, official minutes from the committee meetings, e-mails exchanged among committee members and official documents from the ministry. To get more information, we conducted six retrospective semi-structured expert interviews with other members of the committee (3), people from the ministry (2) and the former minister herself (1). Because of the pandemic, we carried out some of these interviews face-to-face but others via Skype or Zoom in May 2021. In the case of the former minister, one of us had an informal meeting with her in a cafe in January 2020 (before the pandemic broke out) and then discussed the issue further via e-mail and Facebook. We analysed the expert interviews to gain their inside and unique perspective on how the reform proposal developed. We devised categories from our personal memories and notes from that time and, based on these two steps, we created a structured interview guide and complementary thematic analytical grid for the interviews. In the analytical process, we transcribed or summarised selected parts of the interviews, which were the most relevant to answering the posted questions, translated them into English, and jointly agreed on how to interpret them.

In analysing the documents, we systematically compared the changes in the parental leave reform proposal and the reasoning for such changes if provided, as well as changes in the composition of the expert committee. We also focused on the main actors who were sending written comments on the parental leave proposal. Our primary focus was on the (a) thematic shifts in the proposal, (b) the actors involved in the policymaking process and their role, (c) the reasoning provided by the actors for the changes in the proposal on parental leave and 'daddy months' in particular. We do *not* aim to analyse the actors' discourses, rather, we are looking for evidence of what strategies various actors were following.

We are aware that our findings have some limitations. First, we collected the data retrospectively, so both the interviewees and ourselves might have suffered from some memory loss. Second, our interpretations are influenced by our subjective experience, as we were strongly involved in the policy process. To increase the validity of our arguments, we combine various data sources aiming to triangulate the results of our inquiry to ensure a high validity of our arguments (Hammersley, 2008).

RESULTS

Epistemic communities

When we joined the family policy committee, we intended to help reform the country's family policy based on the idea of gender equality. We knew the minister was dedicated to such reforms, including introducing a paternity leave. She was a member of the Orange Club, a group within the Social Democratic party that pushes for reforms that promote gender equality. Already several months before the elections, as a member of the social democratic Orange Club, she publicly called for introducing a one-to-three months long paternity leave. Support for paternity leaves was undermined in the mass media, which framed it in terms of force – they stated the Minister wanted to force fathers to go on leave. The proposal however was rather opening possibilities: fathers will have the possibility of going on parental leave with income replacement *if they want to*. Moreover, not only right-wing politicians but also influential male members of the Social Democratic Party publicly disagreed with this proposal of the Orange Club. Consequently, from the beginning, the idea had a poor image in the public discourse (Formánková et al., 2014).[2] The minister was an outspoken feminist and belonged to the same 'epistemic community' as we did. In addition, she had learned from her time previously having worked at the Ministry of

[2]See e.g. https://www.novinky.cz/domaci/clanek/povinne-deleni-rodicovske-dovolene-poslanci-cssd-jsou-proti-190754.

Labor and Social Affairs that it was important to have her ally at the post of head of the Family Policy Department at the Ministry, because in the past, the vice-minister had usually been a Christian Democrat who promoted conservative family policies. Therefore, she made sure that her ally from the Orange Club, Jana Malácová, received the post. Malácová had studied in Germany and was well aware of the international scholarly discourse on gender and family policy.

Thus, the ministry chose an expert group belonging to the same epistemic community of demographers, sociologists, social policy experts and economists, who were publishing internationally in academic journals and taking part in international scholarly organisations, such as the European Sociological Association, European Consortium for Political Science Research and the European Social Policy Network. Of course, the mere fact of belonging to an academic network does not automatically make somebody an expert, but it helps integrate them into an academic epistemic community. We assumed – and the former minister later confirmed – that the minister and her staff chose the academic members because we were the leading experts on family policy in the country, and they did not expect us to oppose reforms that would promote gender equality.

According to the common definitions of epistemic communities, we should share common values and goals. In our case, the common goal that united us was the belief in evidence-based policies: regardless of political orientation, we all thought that empirical evidence from other countries and the Czech experiences should guide our proposals. Even though we did not systemically ask the committee members about their political beliefs, we knew many of them from the Czech academic world, and we knew that some had rather conservative political and social beliefs, while others had more liberal or socialist or feminist beliefs, or a combination of these. Despite our differences in political orientations, there was a general consensus that we should introduce some form of paid paternity leave, although we had different reasons for this. The reasons varied from a desire to increase gender equality, a desire to increase the country's low birthrate, and/or a desire to make the labour market more efficient.

Advocates of the ideational approach sometimes claim that 'concrete policy ideas are embedded in broader ideologies, and ideologies make space for particular ideas to gain traction in policy and public debates' (Rich, 2011, p. 193). Even though one could claim that our proposals for Nordic-style reforms were embedded in a broader ideology of supporting gender equality, as just noted, not all the committee members were interested in gender equality. Nevertheless, they still belonged to an epistemic community that supports the notion of evidence-based policies, and they had concluded that the evidence supported the reform proposals in order to reach varying goals that individual members shared. Therefore, among this group, there was near-unanimous support for improving access to high-quality daycare for children under three. However, our motives varied from thinking that it is good for the children, good for gender equality, social inclusion, good for increasing the birth-rates and/or good for the labour market. There was also a basic agreement that fathers need to share in the parental leave time for the same reasons.

Even though there was a basic consensus favouring daycare and inducing fathers to share parental leaves in the committee, not everyone was equally enthusiastic. Some were interested in other issues; some feared the effects of paid paternity leave on single mothers; and some were interested in reforming the leave system but did not care about gender equality. Nonetheless, none openly opposed the proposals of introducing paid daddy months.

At first, we had meetings that all the committee members attended, then we broke off into smaller groups that specialised in specific issues. We joined the group dealing with parental leaves and got the task of writing the proposal.

The head of the family policy department held an international expert meeting at the end of 2015, where she invited scholars and other experts from Europe (such as professors from universities like Oxford). This could be seen as part of a legitimising strategy to show the opposing advocacy coalition that the ministry was advocating reforms that were in line with the findings of the most important international research. At that time, we had a policy reform proposal that was included into the draft of the governmental family policy plan but, unlike some other policy proposals that the commission suggested, this proposal was not taken to the cabinet for approval. The proposal was coherent in that it was clear and not contradictory: the introduction of a 3–6 month paternity leave, for example, would not have contradicted any of the other policy proposals that the expert committee made (such as increasing access to daycare).

In 2016, the Christian Democrats pressured the ministry to include some of its supporters in the expert committee and succeeded. These Christian Democrats belonged to an influential conservative advocacy coalition and represented a different epistemic community. They did not represent academia by publishing on various aspects of the family and family policies in the field of sociology, demography, economics, political science or psychology. Instead, they had expertise in family policy making from ministerial and NGO positions related to the Christian Democrats.

The conservative advocacy coalition has long supported the norm of threeness, and the idea that mothers

should be responsible for providing care in the family. As described by Hašková and Saxonberg (2013), its representatives were very vocal about parenting in the national discourse and influential with regard to national family policy making. The belief that mothers should be the sole carers of children until they reach the age of three was firmly entrenched as a core belief of the conservative advocacy group. As one of the leading discursive institutionalist theorists put it, ideational change is most likely to take place 'when parties are reasonable and use evidence-based arguments to reach agreement, where persuasion is the key to creating shared understandings and building consensus, and in which the process itself is based on inclusive, open, trusting, and consensual interaction' (Schmidt, 2010, p. 17–18). At the time, the conservative advocacy coalition did not value evidence-based arguments.

In the Czech Republic, there has not been much discussion among politicians concerning the issue of evidence-based practice, although it has become the official doctrine of some West European governments (for the UK case, see Nutley et al., 2003). Instead, there is sometimes outright disdain for conclusions coming from empirical studies. For example, during a parliamentary seminar, Martin Potůcek, one of the country's leading experts on social policy, once claimed that making benefits means-tested would likely decrease birth rates. In response, one of the MPs from the liberal-conservative ODS replied: 'If this is the result of research from academic institutions, where such specialists are leaders, it should make taxpayers wonder whether it makes any sense to finance such workplaces' (Saxonberg, 2014, p. 235). The point here is not whether his statement was correct, but rather it is that it shows the anti-science view of such Czech politicians, who think that only research that supports their pre-conceived values should receive funding.

Previous studies have shown that in the Czech Republic, the most influential members of the conservative advocacy coalition included conservative politicians (from the Christian Democratic Party but also the liberal-conservative ODS that was in the opposition during this period) some popular psychologists aligned to networks of Catholic or other conservative-Christian organisations who did not refer to comparative empirical studies published in international academic journals (see Hašková & Dudová, 2017; Hašková et al., 2013). This group has always advocated continuing the Czech model of mothers staying at home with their children for a long period, while arguing that fathers are not as capable as mothers of taking care of children and that children under the age of three suffer when attending daycare, because they will not become sufficiently attached to their mothers. According to several interviewees, when the Christian Democrats started to find out about the proposals coming from the commission, they began pressuring the ministry to include their supporters in the commission. Since the collapse of the communist regime, until the coalition government came to power in 2013, the Christian Democrats had been in charge of family policy and usually held the post of vice-minister at the Ministry of Social Affairs with responsibility for family issues. For them, since the collapse of the communist regime, family policy has been a core issue, while for the Social Democrats, it has only been important for the minority feminist wing of the party. Thus, the party felt pushed aside when it was not included in developing the new family policy plan in the period when we were on the commission. When the commission on family policy reform was established, the Christian Democrats were in charge of the Ministry of Agriculture but had little influence over the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs. Therefore, they demanded the right to appoint a representative working for the party to join the commission. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Agriculture, which it controlled, became one of the biggest opponents of the family policy reform proposal. Moreover, the Christian Democratic deputy prime minister accused the commission of being one-sided, deviating from the government coalition agreement, discriminating against married couples, questioning the importance of individual family care for the youngest children by increasing the pressure to reduce parental leave, and only focusing on equal opportunities for women and men.

When representatives of the party joined the commission in 2016, at the meetings, they failed to get the existing proposals substantially changed. However, the Christian Democrat party experts did succeed in greatly prolonging the period of the commission's work. Meanwhile, some academics working for the commission started to lose interest in these meetings as no new ideas emerged, and we had already worked out a proposal together with the ministry. As one former committee member wrote us in an e-mail (written in English): 'I was so disappointed by the whole process that I have erased it almost completely from my mind. I only remember that it was a group of good experts with international experience (many of young age) that had quite a clear-cut view how the modern family policy should look like. For me, it was a lesson how political ideology can distort the pure aim to help Czech families to fulfil their reproductive plans and educational roles/goals'. By 'political ideology', the researcher means the views of the Christian Democratic allies that started to attend the meetings. Some other academics reflected their experience in the committee positively, though. They appreciated that the committee was primarily comprised of academics who provided the ministry with useful data, while being

independent in suggesting the various family policy draft proposals for the ministry's further use. They also appreciated the process of learning from the other academics.

According to several people we interviewed, the proposal to reform parental leave so that it introduces income-related 'daddy months' was seen as problematic also within the ministry departments as some claimed it would mean a complete paradigmatic shift from a flat-rate system to an income-related insurance-based system of benefits, and families would lose money if the father did not take the leave. However, this would have only been true of the more radical proposal. The more moderate proposal, which was included in the governmental family policy plan in a modified form, would have merely added paternity months to the system based on the same rules as the maternity months. Moreover, in 2016 the minister introduced a week-long leave for fathers when the child is born, based on the income-replacement principle (which went into force in 2017). The fact that the government could introduce this week based on the income-replacement principle shows that, in reality, the opposition of some officials was based on ideology more than the costs involved in changing too many laws. Some ministry officials, coalition partners and party members also argued that 'daddy months' would limit parents' 'freedom of choice'. Of course, adding extra months for fathers does not decrease anyone's freedom of choice, but instead increases it, because now fathers would have the chance to *choose* to go on parental leave without having to worry about the economic consequences of it; and if they choose not to go on leave, then they are no worse off than they are in today's system.

This situation shows that even if experts are basically united in an adversarial system, they will still not succeed in getting their proposals passed when coalition partners strongly oppose the proposals and the minister is not autonomous to push through proposals without their support. This is especially the case if the minister does not have the support for the reform of her own party. When there is a strong dominating party that supports the minister, and the party makes it a key issue, then the party can induce the junior coalition parties to accept the reforms in return for allowing them to pass some reforms that they also consider to be key, so that both sides have something to show their voters.

The dynamics of subsystems

Even though Ingold and Gschwend (2014) claimed that scientists may have great influence over policymaking when there are conflicts between parties in an adversarial system, our case shows that conflicts among parties can also prevent experts from having influence and instead can favour the status quo by limiting the reforms. As Weible et al. (2010) observed, experts are the most likely to succeed in pushing for reforms in collaborative cases, where there is cross-coalition policy-oriented learning. In the Czech case, family and gender issues are so ideologically charged that many politicians were unwilling to 'learn' from the empirical evidence or expert opinions. We argue that, for this process to take place, three additional conditions must be fulfilled: (1) the coalitions must see the expert group as being legitimate; (2) the party behind the proposal must be united around it; (3) the party behind the proposal must be willing to offer the other parties something tangible in return for their support.

Legitimacy

The conservative coalition did not see us as legitimate, as their belief system centred on the need to support the norm of threeness and 'traditional' families with women being the main care providers. Traditionally, the Christian Democrats had control over family policy, having one of their members being the vice-minister. This meant that they considered family policy to be a core issue, and they probably felt resentment that the social democratic minister desired to change the status quo. Adding to the problem was the fact that the Czech Republic does not have the tradition of having expert committees proposing solutions, although in the 1960s, a population committee was formed that proposed reforms in family policy (Saxonberg, 2014). The country does not have the strong tradition of basing policies on the proposals of expert groups that countries such as France and Sweden have of setting up expert committees, whose proposals gain widespread support in parliament (Brown, 2014). This lack of tradition gave the conservative advocacy coalition even less reason to consider the committee's proposals to be legitimate.

United party

Another critical element is that the party proposing the reform must be united around it. If it is not a key issue for the party and the party leadership only weakly supports it or does not support it at all, then it will not be able to bargain with the coalition parties and be ready to offer them meaningful concessions to gain their support. In our case, the coalition parties were rather united and centralised, while the Social Democrats were fractionalised. The Christian Democrats were ideologically united

around the norm of threeness and support for marriage and the 'traditional' family with the mothers being the main care provider, while the other coalition partner, ANO, was a highly centralised populist party that lacked a strong ideology, but was almost completely dependent on its leader.

The social democrats, by contrast, were very divided, and even though it had a feminist-friendly faction that organised the Orange Club, the party's mainstream did not have a feminist orientation. Many party members were much more worried about the pension issue than family issues, as pensioners comprise an important part of the electorate. Meanwhile, there was a group of more 'old-left' types of Social Democrats, who were not concerned with 'new left' issues like gender equality. Finally, there was a group of 'modernizers' (who espouse similar views as the Nordic Social Democrats) that included Marksová-Tominová, who belonged to the Orange Club and initiated the expert group. However, she was rather isolated in the party leadership. It is obviously easier for a minister to push through if she or he has the solid backing of the party.

Willingness to negotiate a trade-off

As scholars have noted, 'parties differ not only in terms of the positions they take on specific issues but also in the importance they ascribe to certain policies' (Schermann & Ennser-Jedenastik, 2014, p. 793). If the Social Democratic Party had considered the family policy reform to be a core issue that it could unite around, then it could have pressured the coalition partners to accept these reforms as part of some kind of trade-off where the other parties are also allowed to pass some reforms that they consider important for their profile. Yet, given the lack of support within her own party, the 'daddy months' had little hope of passing. Preventing parental leave reform was a core issue for the Christian Democratic coalition partner, while introducing the reform was not a key issue for the Social Democratic leadership; therefore, the Social Democrats had nothing to offer the Christian Democrats in exchange for their support of the reform.

CONCLUSION: WHY DID THE PROPOSAL FAIL?

According to the advocacy coalition framework, if there is an adversarial subsystem, experts will gain influence because the competing political groups will accept the experts as mediators, who have great legitimacy because of their expertise; however, in our case, the opposite happened. Our conclusion is that their hypothesis only holds under certain conditions, none of which were fulfilled in our case.

First, the conservative advocacy coalition did not perceive the need to carry out radical reforms, making them less open to learning and accepting proposals from the expert group. Second, that coalition did not perceive the expert committee as being legitimate, as its epistemic community was based on the ideal of the 'traditional' family with women being the main care provider and the preservation of the norm of threeness and was not open to suggestions coming from the evidence-based-policy approach. The lack of legitimacy for our group also came from the fact that the country does not have a strong tradition of turning to expert groups made of scientists and professionals active in their professional areas for suggestions.

Second, we also argue that the advocacy coalition framework should be complemented with an analysis of the party system. In the Czech Republic, the Social Democratic Party was very split and fractionalised at the time and the feminist group comprised only a minority in the party. They were not able to convince the party leadership or regional leaders of the necessity of 'daddy months, as these leaders were more concerned about getting votes from elderly citizens rather than young families, as the former group comprised a more important part of their electorate. If the party had united around the expert committee's proposal of income-related 'daddy months', it could have tried to negotiate a compromise with the other two coalition parties so that they would get something in return. In other words, we still think that the advocacy coalition framework can offer a viable explanation of the role of expert groups if complemented with an analysis of the coalition dynamics.

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